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ABSTRACT

Although Chinese-speaking men and women constitute the largest group of international graduate students in the United States, contrary to expectations, some China-born communication scholars have had difficulties publishing their China studies in the United States. If a China-born scholar conducts two studies, one based on data from China and one based on data from the United States, he or she would have an easier time publishing the American-oriented material. Even though China-born scholars can find plenty of research questions about China, because they want to succeed in the United States, many involve themselves in American-related research. In the process many develop a strong personal interest in such research topics. However, if most China-born scholars and students avoid China-related research topics, the research community and society on both sides of the Pacific may lose the opportunity to benefit from the unique knowledge that resides with this group of researchers. Future discussion should center on: (1) a refereed academic journal in communication primarily for Chinese speakers; (2) adoption of promotion criteria by Chinese area universities which give more credit for publication in Chinese journals; and (3) awareness of China-born students in the United States of the dual-master situation--that is, that needs and interests are different in each country. (NH)

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China-Born Communication Scholars in the U.S.-- Opportunities and Challenges

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Remarks to Be Made to

The Panel on

Research Agenda on Chinese Communication: Theories, Methods, and Data

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Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

When you walk into a graduate lounge or computer room in a journalism / communication department in an American university, the chances are you will hear someone speaking Chinese. You should not be surprised -- Chinese speaking men and women constitute the largest group of international graduate students in the United States. A small, but fast growing, number of them are completing their doctoral degrees and entering research and teaching in the United States. More of them are going back to teach in Taiwan, Hongkong, Singapore, and mainland China.

Chinese are their native language, and they have spent most of their life, 25-40 years, in China or another Chinese speaking area. Consequently, many students and their advisors, Chinese and Americans alike, think those Chinese students/scholars should have the best chance to succeed if their academic concentration is on something related to China.

Contrary to the expectations, some China-born scholars have had a difficulties publishing or publicizing in the U.S. their China studies. It may sound ironic. If a China-born scholar conduct two studies, one based on data from China and one based on data from U.S., he or she would have an easier time publishing the U.S. study. On the other hand, if two scholars, an American and a Chinese, write about the same data from China, the American would have a better chance for success.

A casual look at some of our China-born scholars' publications may help illustrate the point. When I was writing these remarks, a mail came in that lists all the papers accepted

at this convention by Communication Theory and Methodology Division, a division that is supposedly not bounded within any specific culture, nation or country. Of a total of thirty one papers accepted by the division, seven have authors whose first names spelled like Chinese, who are the sole or senior authors of the six of those seven papers (Guo, 1993; Huang, 1993; Lee, 1993; Miller, Chew and Yen, 1993; Pan and Kosicki, 1993; Wang, 1993; Zhao and Bleske, 1993). The quality of those Chinese scholars' work can also be seen in the fact that two of those six papers won top awards of the division -- one as the Top Faculty Paper and another as a Top Three Paper (Pan and Kosicki, 1993; Zhao and Bleske, 1993).

How many of the seven papers deal with topics related in any way with China or Chinese communities anywhere in the world? NONE! How many of the seven papers dealt with topics related to communication in U.S., rely on data from U.S., or use theories originated from U.S.? SEVEN!

When I put this mail back I saw another mail lying on the desk. It lists the papers in a session of Radio-Television Journalism Division, another division that is supposedly not limited by cultural or national boundaries. Five papers are to be presented to that session, two of them have China-born scholars as the senior authors (Zhao et al, 1993; Zhu et al, 1993). One of the two was judged as the Top Faculty Paper of the division (Zhu et al, 1993). What are the two papers about? American political communication. There is not even a single

word about China in either of the two papers.

Several of those authors and others have also published in leading journals in communication, dealing mostly with communication in the U.S. (I don't have the references in hand but interested readers can look for Tsan-kuo Chang, Zhongdang Pan, and Jian-Hua Zhu in such journals as Journalism Quarterly, Communication Research, and Journal of Communication).

Imagine the same eight or so China-born authors submit ten or so papers on communication in China, what might be the reaction from the reviewers? Some of them did so, and were met with success, such as Tuen-yu Lau's research (again reference missing here). But most others had more difficulties. Some of them have shared with me the comments that conference/journal reviewers regarding their China-related research papers:

"China is too special a case to tell us anything about public opinion." (So which country is a more generalizable case? Or how many published studies are based on a representative sample of human being?)

"This paper concludes that communication in China is so and so. So what?!" (How does it sound if the word "China" is replaced by the word "US"?)

"This paper is too China-specific." (How likely is a study criticized for being too U.S.-specific?)

"The author never succeeded in establishing the critical value of this research." (That is, the authors did not persuade the reviewer that this research is important. The same China-

born authors, I happen to know, conducted quite a few U.S. studies were considered interesting).

Apparently, China-born scholars can find plenty of research questions about China, but they have difficulties getting the audience interested. My colleagues and I have had many discussions trying to find out why. Some American professors, aware that myself is a Chinese, would politely take a self-critical position: "Many Americans, including some reviewers, are naive, and culture-chauvinist. You just have to educate us. You may not succeed immediately. But you have to keep trying. Its good for the field."

Some of my colleagues see China-born and U.S.-born China watchers as possible collaborators in educating the research community. To them, the research community's understanding of communication in East Asian countries is like children's understanding of molecular science. Although Asia-born scholars have a personal knowledge of how communication works in Asia, that knowledge is too advanced to be understood by the research community, just like a biology professor's understanding of molecular science is too much for children. US-born China scholars can bridge the gap like school teachers can help children to understand something about molecular science. But those American researchers believe that research community needs to pay more respect to the research conducted by Asia-born scholars to really benefit from their knowledge.

I, however, often throw into the discussion a different view. After all, this is America. The audience of our research are mainly Americans. People are more interested in the things that happen every year nearby than the places on the other side of the globe where they might visit once in a life time. To an average American, knowledge about China is just not as useful as knowledge about America. China, after all, is just one of more than 150 countries in the world. Therefore, while the supply of China research is very small, it may have already exceeded the demand.

As the above arguments emphasize the audience (including reviewer) factor, I also try to find explanations in the authors. When China-born scholars conduct research on China, they are often believed to have two advantages -- they have a strong interest in China topics, and they have personal experience in China that give them language ability as well as an intimate understanding of how things actually work. What is often overlooked is the possibility that both could be disadvantages. The high interest some time becomes high passion that hinders one's judgement regarding the appropriateness of a topic for the audience. The knowledge from decades of personal experience form a psychological frame of reference that is totally different from Americans' frame of reference regarding China. People can not communicate effectively without a common frame of reference. In this case changing a Chinese frame of reference to fit that of Americans is extremely difficult. It is as difficult as forcing

one to speak his or her home dialect with an American accent (not German, not Japanese, but an American accent). Remember the four-line poem by HE Zhizhang of Tang Dynasty, that describes an old man who returned to home the first time after he left as a child? Remember the second line "The home accent did not change, but the hair grey"?

When a China-born scholar studies communication in U.S., their lack of experience in U.S. is often seen as a disadvantage. While it is, indeed, a big barrier, it is surmountable. Students have usually mastered some basic English skills and know something about U.S. before they can be admitted into graduate schools in the U.S.. Within two or three years after they started their graduate studies in U.S. quite a few China-born students had conference presentations and/or journal publications on U.S. subjects. This happens when a student can devote him/herself early on on a well specified subject, when he or she takes a well designed combination of courses that serves the methodological and theoretical needs of the research, and when a professor who is an expert on the topic would actively involve the student in the professor's research. Mao Zedong once said that a blank sheet has its advantage -- on a blank sheet you can draw the most beautiful paintings without the interference from what was already on it. For China-born students in communication, once the first barriers are overcome, the relative lack of U.S. experience brings some advantages. He or she is less likely to be stuck with a particular stereotype, ideology,

or way of thinking. With an outsider's view, he or she may identify new topics overlooked by the insiders, or bring new perspectives to the old topics that may seem refreshing to the insiders.

To be sure, I do not intend to discourage the new comers from studying China. It is impossible -- most people, including myself, will always have a keen interest in the people and social changes in the home town and home country. It is also undesirable -- if most of the China-born scholars and students would indeed avoid China-related research topics, all parties stand to loose. The individual researchers may lose the opportunity to be involved in the kind of intellectual activities that may give them the uttermost self-satisfaction. The students, the research communities, and societies in general at both sides of the pacific may lose the opportunity to benefit from the unique knowledge that this group of researchers may bring.

What I do advocate is that China-born students and scholars, their advisors, and research community in general should have a modest expectation for the outcome if a China-born student or scholar is to spend time trying to publish China-related studies in the U.S.. The chances of success may not be as high as many of us thought. Further, if the student or scholar fails in that effort, one should consider that failure may not necessarily due to the common theoretical, methodological, or writing problem, or the author's lack of understanding of the subject under study,

but due to the author's lack of understanding of the audience.

More specifically, I propose the following for discussion:

1) A refereed academic journal in communication is needed whose primary audience should be Chinese speaking researchers, teachers, public policy makers, and communication practitioners. It could be a new journal. Or it could be an expanded and/or reformed version of a publication that already exists in Taiwan, Hongkong, Singapore, or possibly Mainland China, so long as the journal is totally free from any non-academic interference or restrictions. The contributors, referees, and editors do not have to be restricted to Chinese; nor should the subjects being discussed in the articles. But the primary function of the journal should be clearly defined: to enhance the Chinese readers' understanding of communication, hence serve the needs of Chinese speaking societies, including mainland China, Taiwan, Hongkong, Singapore, among others. To reach the largest number of potential audience, Chinese should be the primary language of the journal.

For the same reason, such activities as Chinese Communication Association and 1993 Taipei Conference on Communication Research and Education are valuable efforts that need to be continued.

2) Eventually, the universities in Chinese speaking areas should adopt the promotion criterion that a publication in an excellent Chinese journal (when it comes to exist) should receive more credits than a publication in an equivalent non-Chinese

(American, European, or anywhere else) journal. Although at present Chinese scholars may still look up to American journals because of the academic freedom, blind review, theoretical rigor, methodological quality, and the international influence they enjoy, one or more Chinese journals will eventually acquire all those qualities. At that time one thing will make a Chinese journal more valuable for the Chinese societies -- the journal's dedication to serve Chinese societies. Unlike in natural science or technical research where universal criteria for scholarly quality are possible, in humanity and social science we study people and society. Therefore the interests of the people and needs of a society define the value of a research. As the interests and needs differ from nation to nation and from culture to culture, the value of a research can be and should be judged differently in different nations and cultures.

3) China-born students studying in U.S. should be aware of what I call a dual-master situation. American research community judge academic quality on the basis of, justifiably, American interest and American needs, while such needs and interests may be very different from or even incompatible with Chinese interests and needs.

Career decisions should take this situation into consideration. If one's personal aspiration is to find a good research job in an American university and eventually grow into a respected researcher in American research community, selecting a US-related rather than China-related topic promises a better

chance of success.

Those who are only interested in China-related topics face tough choices. For each paper or book they have to decide who are their primary audience -- Americans or Chinese. This decision guides all other decisions regarding topic selection, theorizing, writing, and selection of publication outlets. This decision will also determine what kind of impact a research is likely to make. For example, if one decides to address American audience, s/he should provide strong argument convincing reviewers why Americans should be interested in the topic, theorize and write in a way that Americans would understand, and try to publish it in an American journal. The author should not expect the research, if it is published, to attract much attention from too many American audience except a handful researchers who are interested in East Asia. The research will probably have a better name recognition in Taiwan, Hongkong, and Singapore, particularly among the U.S.-educated researchers who follow American journals closely. But name recognition does not necessarily translate into contribution or impact. As the publication was not designed to enhance the knowledge of the Chinese audience, only by accident can it address the real needs of Chinese communities.

If a researcher decides to address the Chinese interest, he or she can reach the largest number of intended audience in one of the journals currently edited in one of the Chinese speaking areas. But few of those journals are refereed, and most of them

have yet to gain respect from and make an impact on the larger Chinese speaking area. For example, the journalism journals currently edited in Beijing still has a long way to go before they can become respected publication outlets for researchers from Taiwan, Hongkong or Singapore. Furthermore, for those who face job interview, tenure decision, and promotion decisions in the U.S., an article in a Chinese journal does not carry as much weight as a journal article in a leading American journal.

Some China-born scholars have let both their minds and hearts to guide their acts -- they want to succeed in U.S., so they involve themselves in U.S.-related research, and in the process developed a strong personal interest in such research topics; at the same time, whenever opportunities for conducting China-related research arise, their passion for China compels them to grasp those opportunities. A few others are more cautious. They fear that, if they divide their time and energy, they would not do well in either area. So they decided to concentrate on U.S.-related studies and plan to avoid China-related topics until they feel secured in their academic positions. There is, I assume, no one approach that is the best for all. Every individual will have to make that decision depending on his or her unique situation.

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